"Spaces of Contemporary Horror: Poverty and Social Exclusion as 21st Century Spectres"

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Abstract

This research explores the connections between the recent economic crisis and the contemporary horror film. To this end, I begin with a theoretical examination of the symbolic function of two key motifs (the ghost and the house), and the possibilities of their use to reinforce or subvert the mechanisms of the neoliberal cultural framework. Taking the horror genre as a privileged space for reading the unacknowledged tensions of our society, I consider the filmic use of domestic spaces, the suburbs, and the urban wastelands that the crisis has left in its wake. Against a context that cultivates fear based on the idea of social exclusion—poverty as the ultimate mechanism of horror—I put forward the possibility that the horror genre adopts explicitly ethical stances through a vindication of the meeting point between Deleuze's and Lévinas' respective theories of the cinematic face.

Keywords

Horror Cinema – Social Exclusion – Financial Crisis – Suburbs – Poverty – Film analyse – Cultural studies

"Spaces of Contemporary Horror: Poverty and Social Exclusion as 21st Century Spectres"

1. A word

My analysis begins with the following all-but-forgotten characters: φάντασμα. A slippery word, lost in the darker recesses of ancient Greek. *Phantasma* is in fact the happy combination of two other terms that intersect at the origins of our civilisation, and that will be of vital importance to the territory I wish to explore in this article. The first of these terms is φαντάζω, which could be translated as "to show", "to place in front", or "to bring here". The second is no less than φάος: "light". This "showing through light" could be a good place to begin conceiving of filmmaking, albeit with the need for a particular qualification: that cinema is a phantasmagorical art not only because of its betrayal of the old scientific aspiration (Mayrata, 2017) to show *the object objectively*—a strange paradox of language that has proved no obstacle, incidentally, to lively debates about the realist (i.e., non-phantasmic) principle of images—but conversely, because what makes cinema true is precisely its phantasmal condition.

Of course, according to the Enlightenment and positivist paradigm, nothing could be more absurd than the idea of a true spectre: a spectre envisioned as verifiable, measurable, predictable. Yet in the Greek etymology of the term this is already assumed: what is true is that which is exposed, which is brought here and now—in other words: "this uncoveredness or unhiddenness of beings is what we call truth" (Heidegger, 2010: 6).

However, it may perhaps be more useful here to invert certain terms and begin speaking not of a true spectre but of a spectral truth. This leads us into much more accessible terrain that allows us to mark out some clearer lines, where we find the spectres that rise from the ruins of hunger and haunt Europe (Marx and Engels, 2013: 48), the spectres rising out of desire as theorised by Freud (Parrondo and González Hortigüela, 2015), or the dancing spectres that foreshadow the future, watched by an enraptured Zarathustra (Nietzsche, 1985: 52). Of course, it would seem consistent that Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche—among many others—knew something of that truth which, precisely because it was spectral, was designed to undermine, subvert and demolish immense ideological realms that had caused considerable suffering and repression over the preceding centuries.

And this is because spectres, by definition, always have something disturbing to say: to accuse the guilty of a crime, to uncover the Indian burial ground upon which the house has been built, to warn of an impending danger, to seek payment of a debt acquired in life… Following the highly thought-provoking seminal work of Andrew Lang, the only historical period in which the spectres were silenced was precisely the Age of Enlightenment, when reason reigned supreme. The modern ghost

> appears nobody knows why; he has no message to deliver, no secret crime to reveal, no appointment to keep, no treasure to disclose, no commissions to be executed, and, as an almost invariable rule, he does not speak, even if you speak to him (Lang, 1894: 95).

With the collapse of absolute faith in reason (that is, with the acknowledgement of our finite nature, of the certainty that watertight and unquestionable truth is an impossibility for us), ghosts began speaking again. And only a few decades later, the cinema was born. The spectres dance on the screen, exposing (and being exposed) through light, and recovering, as it were, their etymological origin. In 1896, Méliès would film *The Haunted Castle* (*Le manoir du diable*) and those two forgotten words (φαντάζω and φάος) would be fused together once more.

2. The house and the ghost

The Marxist spectre was described as haunting Europe. It was a spectre which, in addition to haunting, *marched* to its anthem, "The Internationale" ("Reason thunders on the march: This is the end of oppression!" declaims the Spanish version). It was a spectre embodied in history (i.e., in the proletariat), allied as much with the post-Hegelian parable as with "reason on the march", reason marching at a steady pace, without haste but without hindrance; reason sweeping through the avenues of the Old Continent, just as the urban planners of the social hygiene movement in Paris had done before it.

Of course, in our day and age it is far from clear that our spectres are interested in reason, and much less clear that they march. On the contrary, their interest is in training (constant, unquenchable, unattainable) and their pace is a high-speed race. The idea is to run with all one's might to reach the highest level possible—although we still don't

know what this "highest level" (Pardo, 2007) that our MBAs, entrepreneurship courses and private business schools lead to actually is.

And what role does the—for now, somewhat haunted—house have in all this? As Fernández Porta pointed out in his ground-breaking essay earlier this decade (2012), family life, i.e., domestic life, has been brutally truncated by corporate life. To summarise very briefly, contemporary first-world individuals invest more hours a day at work than at home, developing far more powerful, lasting and communal bonds with their colleagues than with their family or community, and, of course, receiving the guarantees of their own existence—of what they are—not so much from a traditional emotional environment as from the terms established by the corporation for which they work. The new individuals are what their company makes them: their challenges include the acquisition of new markets, their free time is interrupted by "team building" activities, and their community engagement is determined by "corporate social responsibility". In opposition to this, of course, friendship and family ties require sacrifice, time, and trust. They are much more complicated to maintain and, in principle, to break. The domestic space therefore loses its meaning. The work space is a fantasy kingdom (ruthless, of course, but what fantasy kingdom isn't?) while the domestic space is either a nightmare realm in which solitude and anti-depressants go hand in hand—as in films like *Shame* (S. McQueen, 2011) or *Heartbeat Detector* (*La question humaine,* N. Klotz, 2007)—or an uninhabitable wasteland where the Others torment us with their demands for care and time.

The house (the domestic space) is wounded by the corporation. But it is also wounded by the global economy, on at least two levels. Firstly, because the time we invest in our house is time stolen from our workplace productivity and, by extension, from the time we need for training to update ourselves, to be more competitive and to learn how to do things that we couldn't do before (new languages, new software programs, new sales techniques, etc.). Secondly, because the house (the domestic space) has the bad habit of representing the great nightmare for the contemporary workplace: the space of roots, stability, permanence, i.e., solidity. Because to combat what a person really is inside the home—father, mother, neighbour or, ultimately, citizen—the corporation must use fear, which means conjuring up a very different spectre: the spectre of unemployment, the spectre of hunger.

3. The house and the threat from without

Clearly, we are facing a historical moment in which we most urgently need to reconsider our relationship with the sinister as it was outlined in the first instance by Freud (1979), and in a second, acknowledged instance by Heidegger in his theorising on anxiety (2009: 207-208). Our purpose here is to consider the act of dwelling as an act of *being-at-home*, or more precisely, of establishing our fleeting passage through this world as a possibility of having a home.

To have a home—or *to dwell*—hangs on the relationship we have with the world, a relationship that is ultimately a relationship of constant confrontation with the crushing presence of the real (González Requena, 2010). In both Freud and Heidegger—notwithstanding all the differences between them that might be imagined—this idea poses an extraordinary difficulty, a complexity that involves brutally denying Spinoza's major premise and affirming that the world (or nature) is essentially un-inhabitable; i.e., it is not designed for us. The house is a poetic object constructed on the basis of its *threshold* (Heidegger, 1990), of the inside/outside division that assures the possibility of taking refuge in peace—without this ever being confused with escaping from our inevitable mortality. For Bachelard, the house is a poetic space where the different rooms can be read in terms of both their symbolic function—what the intimacy that takes place in a given room means, how memory and language work inside it—and a dialectic function: interior/exterior, limit/universe, individual/global. However, as Bachelard decided to study the spaces of happiness—the so-called *felicitous spaces* or *topophilia* (1994: xxxv)—we must invert some of his notions (*drawers, nests, shells*) precisely to see how, in dealing with the poetics of space, contemporary horror films propose a "panic of space". In this respect, a middle ground can be found in Heidegger, who suggested that inside every house was nothing less than a *tree of death*, that is, a *coffin* (Heidegger, 1994: 141), which with its presence reminds us not only of the inevitable disappearance of its dwellers but—more significantly for this study—of the need to live together with our family members in a beautiful state of care (*Sorge*) that is understood here instead as an *accompanying-one-another-towards-death*.

The next step, following on from my discussion in the previous section, requires us to accept that many such attempts to dwell, especially during the twentieth century, have

failed spectacularly. The cities have been losing their social logic in favour of a massive accumulation of "living spaces" crowded together wildly in outrageous urban plans: "Given that it is neither sensible nor expectable to accord meaning to reality, the deconstructive architect must reflect the meaninglessness that surrounds him" (Arenas, 2011: 47). This meaninglessness has a lot to do with the way in which death has now been erased not only from the cities—banished ever further away to cemeteries that function as heterotopias, cemeteries that cannot be reached on foot and that tend to be located a good distance from the massive shopping malls that crowds of people flock to each weekend—but also inside the homes themselves, which must necessarily be transformed quickly thanks to the constant dilapidation of the low-cost furniture that we can barely even allow ourselves.

To close the circle, in the past decade the house has gone from being the domestic space par excellence to the ultimate emblem of the crisis. It is unnecessary to reproduce here the all-too-familiar story of the housing bubble, or the way that the banks joyfully spread around a wealth that didn't exist (another spectre that flew around joyfully haunting Europe, until it suddenly vanished), or the systematic destruction of the environment. The paradox was felt in full force upon the collapse of Lehman Brothers (MacEwan & A. Miller, 2015: 110-112) and the revelation of what had really happened: thousands of people had become trapped forever in the exercise of paying off their houses. The horror lay inside the little cottage on the outskirts of town that the self-described "middle class" had agreed to pay for: it was a spectre that manifested itself in the form of a mortgage and threatened eviction.

The property crisis showed us—if you'll pardon the play on words—a way of experiencing time that surely would have elicited an ironic smile from Heidegger. Inserted into the horizon of every human being who had happily signed a mortgage deed was a new dimension of the temporal that was positioned parallel to death itself: the dimension of debt. Thus, it was to debt that all actions of love, work and education were owed: we would have to pay, decade after decade, in a kind of projection of the temporal that reaches almost beyond human limits. An extraordinary paradox: while work and education, loves and lifestyles (Bauman, 2006) became increasingly liquid, increasingly unstable, the economic debt that each individual contracted with the banking institutions became more solid, more lasting.

As was the case in all spheres of life, the cinema took no more than a few months to recognise the magnitude of the disaster. In this respect, the significant role played specifically by the horror genre is striking. The fact that Detroit has become one of the privileged scenarios of the genre in the last decade is pointing—as David Church mentions in his work (2018)—to a global metaphor of how unleashed capitalism ended up as pure ruin. As Dora Apel (2015) rightly showed us, Detroit has become the central icon in a long chain of disasters typical of the 21st century. Disasters which are directly connected with the abuse of technology (Fukushima), the political incompetence in the face of the brutal advances of nature (Katrina), and of course, the collapse of the global financial system:

> Although deindustrial decline is widespread across the country and abroad, most notably in the former leading manufacturing centers, Detroit has become the preeminent example of urban decay, the global metaphor for the current state of neoliberal capitalist culture and the epicenter of the photographic genre of deindustrial ruin imagery (Apel, 2015: 3)

As Apel suggests, Detroit is the great metaphor for both a certain global state of mind—what he calls *the dark side of modernity* (p. 5)—and the explicit failure of the economic promises of the neoliberal economic system. The horror genre, by its very nature, can take advantage of both the fascinating aesthetic features of the ruins—consider, for example, the inevitable aerial shots captured by drones showing entire blocks, abandoned and collapsing—and the lack of social power of its few survivors: anonymous citizens who must deal with intolerable situations in order to survive.

In 2013, there was the worldwide release of *Only Lovers Left Alive* (J. Jarmusch), an exceptional vampire movie shot mainly in the deserted neighbourhoods of Detroit. The film barely needed any art direction for the location shots: completely vacant neighbourhoods, empty streets, abandoned buildings with weeds growing inside them, movie theatres that were torn down after their owners went bankrupt, streets unlit because the power supply was cut... dramatic factory closures and the devastating effect of evictions on the disadvantaged population had already turned the urban landscape into a sprawling dead body. I can mention other recent movie as *It follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), deeply analysed by David Church (2018).

Heidegger's *coffin* was no longer a human emblem to remind us of the value that brevity gives life. Nor was it the capsule that the post-apocalyptic vampires needed for their rest. Every city had been turned into a massive coffin, an apocalyptic setting, a total ruin into which nature was quite simply taking over. Detroit had turned suddenly into a *ghost town*, i.e., a completely insane, in-human territory. *Only Lovers Left Alive* could still maintain a certain romantic epic quality that is almost tender, and even a reasonably digestible intellectual comedic tone.

The film seems to show a brief glimpse of a love story between vampires that is, at heart, simply a deep metaphor for the division of the contemporary world: Adam (Todd Hiddleston) lives in isolation in a huge house in Detroit, surrounded by guitars and records from the second half of the twentieth century; in contrast, Eve (Tilda Swinton) lives in Tangier and has turned a respect for literature into a specific way of surviving the passing of the centuries. The relationship between the two is clearly spatial: the ruin of the First World (wounded by melancholy) as an opposition to the exuberant architecture of the emerging economies—in their alleys, their restaurants and their interiors—that has been able to preserve some of the mysteries of existence. The names of the characters themselves (Adam/Eve) point directly to the biblical myth of Eden, the lost home, the theological expulsion from the first paradise. What Jarmusch proposes is the need to generate something new, a kind of intermediate point, a dialectic of spaces that allows us to leave Detroit (and its suggestions of excessive consumerism) behind and to generate a new poetic way of inhabiting space.

Another recent example is the film *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), analysed in depth by David Church (2018). In many ways, this film can be read as a kind of spatial inversion of what Jarmusch proposed: the romantic element disappears precisely where the sexual contact is contrasted with the space of the ruin. While in Jarmusch's film vampires are fleeing in search of a possible lost paradise, for David Robert Mitchell's humans there is no safe space to flee to: their anonymous opponent pursues them relentlessly, slowly and terribly, turning any possibility of escape into a trap. There are two key elements that make up this blind threat: a sexual dimension—the curse is transmitted sexually, as a kind of metaphor for HIV—but also a social dimension. As if it were a mask for the poverty, the enemy emerges from the ruins and attacks young people from dysfunctional families or those with little social standing.

The film begins with a terrifying circular camera movement in a Detroit slum where the family space of the working middle classes—which was literally razed to the ground by the policies derived from the crisis—is the setting for the first victim: an unnamed teenager who is brutally mutilated. Later, as the epidemic spreads, the spaces of abandoned buildings or razed plots of land will take on more and more prominence in the plot.

However, as the years went by it became evident that time was not going to solve the crisis, that the dwellers were not going to come back, as it became clear that the so-called HOPE VI plan in the United States—a strategy intended to deconcentrate poverty which collapsed during the financial crisis (J. Vale, Shamsuddin & Kelly, 2018)—was nothing more than a contemporary euphemism for a new kind of social and racial cleansing. While critical analyses like David Harvey's were emerging (2010: 1-39), more horror films set in Detroit appeared, each one darker than the last. I will consider two directors in the horror genre to serve as examples. The first is Ryan Gosling, whose film *Lost River* (2014) turns the whole city into a nightmare landscape, showing its (few) survivors taking part in outrageous ceremonies in order to face up to their next meeting with the bank. The second is the unrelenting Fede Álvarez, whose *Don´t Breathe* (2016) offers a brutal inversion of the "home invasion" film with the story of three petty thieves who are kidnapped and tortured mercilessly when they break into the house of a blind war veteran. Both films suggest a certain engulfment of the law: when the powers that should be protecting civilians have been used instead to rob them of their few possessions—where the democratic laws of the United States have left them on the street at the mercy of the elements—a second, ancient tribal law emerges, associated not only with the survival of the strongest, but also with the return of a kind of magical tribalism—especially evident in Gosling's film—in which the horror is expressed in a way that is at once poetic, dark and muted.

Detroit, and by extension every contemporary urban development project inspired by HOPE VI, is clearly depicted in these three films: from romantic poetising (Jarmusch) to the savage surrealism of a horror that cannot be experienced as anything human (Gosling), and finally to pure viscera and absolute absence of hope (Álvarez).

4. The house and the threat from within

It is not insignificant that cultural studies began to take the horror genre seriously following the seminal essay written by Robin Wood in response precisely to the change that the genre underwent following the ultra-conservative years of the Reagan administration. In his powerful text, Wood posited an analytical method founded on one main idea: “One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized” (Wood, 2003: 68). It is important to note that the date of publication of the first edition of Wood's book was 1986, so his theories are worth returning to now given the clear economic and social parallels between the period he was writing about and the contemporary context. For Wood, the horror genre emerged out of the tension between two key elements: the everyday aspects of life (especially the family and its rituals) and an Otherness that proved intolerable to the ideological principles of the period. Needless to say, Wood’s formula was extremely successful for several decades and is more or less explicit in the interpretations of critics in the English-speaking world like Peter Biskind (2009: 256). Since then, once some of the wilder interpretative digressions of post-structuralism had been neutralised (Zumalde, 2006), Wood’s thesis has been expanded, refining and applying new theoretical readings. The haunted house is essentially the horror space par excellence: there is nothing more intimate, nothing more familiar, nothing more extraordinarily fragile when it is invaded by an Other. Sometimes, it is a mystic, revolutionary Other whose action unveils and transcends our petty miseries, as in *Teorema* (P. P. Pasolini, 1968). Generally, however, it is a menacing, terrifying Other, a troubling figure who comes to impose a task or settle an unpaid symbolic debt.

This idea of something unknown bursting into our immediate living space inevitably evokes the *uncanny* in the Freudian sense referred to above. Even the etymological origin of the term itself (*un-heimlich*) points to a whole constellation of signifiers that gather around the space we are dealing with here: the members of the family, the spaces in which they live, the rules that guarantee tranquillity. As Shaila García has shown in a recent study (2019), much contemporary horror cinema uses Freud's concept to unsettle the contemporary spectator: it is the recent experience of crisis, the idea that our house, but also those who live in it, can be "invaded" or "conquered" by an external and

incomprehensible force (an enemy, a mortgage), that is among the sometimes quite conscious worries that have kept us awake at night in recent years. Not even the house (*Heim*), as a support for the familiar (*Heimlich*) can protect us.

This brings us to the very heart of the problem: if, as I suggested above, the founders of the mode of thought that would flourish in the twentieth century (Hegel, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche) are essentially spectres, it is because they presaged what has been approximately one hundred years of pure horror that has turned Europe into a gigantic haunted house. As Slavoj Žižek astutely noted some years ago:

> If there is a phenomenon that fully deserves to be called the "fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture", it is this fantasy of the return of the living dead: the fantasy of a person who does not want to stay dead but returns again and again to pose a threat to the living […] The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt (2000: 22-23).

Among other things, this would explain why the two major figures of the horror genre of the last decade have been none other than the zombie and the ghost. The zombie, as Carolina Meloni and Julio Díaz (2017) have pointed out, clearly reflects the processes of brutality imposed by the contemporary corporation—and, in general, by the symbolic corporate structures of late capitalism—on the bodies of the workers.

Similarly, as other authors have pointed out (Harper, 2002; Bishop, 2010), the zombie is also associated with the "hunger" of capitalism, the metaphor for a consumer society that cannot satisfy itself. The zombie can never slake its thirst, and thus its constant walking, its inability to speak and that dull rage that dominates all its actions are directly evocative of the vision of the consumer as a pure body dominated by the act of swallowing. It is hardly coincidental that when Jim Jarmusch returned to the horror genre last year with The Dead Don't Die (2019), he incorporated a scene in which the zombies attacking the town were also looking for wi-fi connections, antidepressants or luxury items. It is worth remembering too that the vampires in Only Lovers Left Alive refer to humans with the derogatory term "zombies", foreshadowing what the director himself would suggest a few years later.

The ghost, in addition, is always associated with a promise unkept, a ritual not completed, a crime unsolved. In general terms, the zombie is presented as the present consequence of a global misdeed—a misguided military action, or a virus that has escaped from a laboratory, for example—while the purpose of the ghost is to update, to bring into the present, to graft onto the contemporary everyday world something that has been buried, forgotten, or marginalised.

Occasionally, it also supports Wood's theory that this "repressed content" is an Otherness, an alien body that refuses to be forgotten. The inevitable Indian burial grounds or mass graves upon which the respective haunted houses were built in the remakes of *Amityville: The Awakening* (F. Khalfoun, 2017) or *Poltergeist* (G. Kenan, 2015) point to that inexhaustible, unpayable historical debt to the peoples annihilated in the name of progress, or those who, because they were deemed different, were victims of a systematic process of extermination. It is notable that the motif of the Indian graveyard was popular mainly in the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of economic and social conservatism. Think of *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) and *Pet Sematary* (Mary Lambert, 1989), two adaptations of Stephen King novels that revolve around this kind of "cursed space". It is no coincidence that during the current Trump administration both a sequel to the first—*Doctor Sleep* (Mike Flanagan, 2019)—and a remake of the second—*Pet Sematary* (Kevin Kölsch and Dennis Widmyer, 2019)—have been released. It is suggestive to think of this impossibility of rewriting the relationship between mourning and space—at a historical level—as a characteristic feature of horror films made at times of great economic and social tension.

In other cases, however, the ghost simply responds to a blind lust for vengeance over some kind of traumatic death under brutal circumstances, generally associated with madness or mental illness—see, for example, *Lights Out* (D. F. Sandberg, 2016) or *Insidious: Chapter 2* (J. Wan, 2013).

In fact (and this might make an interesting working hypothesis), what I would like to propose here is that what changed after the economic crisis was not so much the structural design of the genre as the *context* in which the events unfold. What frightens us now is not just the brutal act of return and its angst-ridden call for justice, but the act itself of recognising that *poverty*—human, economic, ideological, and even

technological—has been invading, cannibalising, inserting itself into the symbolic frames in which the story unfolds.

5. The spectre of poverty

Shortly after the beginning of the economic crisis, in addition to the horror films set in the suburbs of Detroit, an extraordinarily interesting television genre became popular, to which I could give the ironic label of "domestic pornography". In fact, it worked as a kind of mirror on what authors like Church himself or Tanya Whitehouse (2018) have called "ruin porn", that is, the fascination with the gaze that arises from contemplating the ruins, the abandoned buildings, the uninhabited cities. While in the horror genre the fascination came from emptiness, loss or the unlived life, television offered the opposite message: opulence, wealth, the most excessive interior design. While dozens of families were being evicted from their homes or condemned to social exclusion by the inhumane conditions under which they had signed their mortgages, programs like *¿Quién vive ahí?* (Who Lives There? La Sexta, 2010-2012) offered fulsome prime-time tours of the luxury houses in which Spain's upper classes "dwelt".

The comparison with the pornographic genre, incidentally, is far from a metaphor. Nearly every episode begins with the "surprise" arrival of a film crew that literally invades every corner of the home. The furtive question *"Podemos pasar?"* ("Can we come in?"), to which that week's business mogul invariably responded with a friendly smile and a gesture of welcome, bore more than a passing resemblance to the lascivious gesture of the bored housewife who would act out the entry of the mailman into the *sancta sanctorum* of her family home in her erotic mirror. But what was important here was not so much the chance to witness another's secret acts—his acts of pleasure—but the *private spaces* of the wealthy: their swimming pools, their gargantuan bedrooms, their luxury cars lined up in the garage.

¿Quién vive ahí? and the numerous clones that copied its format shared one particular feature: many of those who "showed their houses" were in fact architects or designers. The price they paid for a little prime-time publicity was the loss of their privacy and the exposure of their families in an obscene, self-serving act. Of course, none of the victims every confessed to their depression, dissatisfaction, or their petty miseries, their

infidelities or their financial wheelings and dealings. They were simply a race of smiling beings, charmingly dressed, with open shirts, slicked-back hair, and brilliant children who could speak several languages. Outside, the wasteland grew. This idea, incidentally, was not an isolated phenomenon of Spanish television: so-called "home-makeover" programs in which enunciative strategies typical of reality shows are combined (Palao Errando, 2009) with the celebration of living in luxurious new dwellings found popularity—and still do—on a global scale. See, for example, Chihara's work on the American case (2017) or Johnson's work on Australian society (2016).

The question, of course, is what strange engine of envy made legions of TV viewers plug in, literally, to the entranced contemplation of their exploiters and the spaces of exploitation; the reason why, at the time we write this article, remakes, variations, and expansions of these programs continue to be broadcast—luxury hotels, luxury boats, luxury parties—with indisputable commercial results. Of course, there is a mechanism associated with the scopic drive in relation to that which we like to look at. However, it would certainly be too easy in this day and age to exonerate the TV viewers by claiming a lack of awareness of "commodity fetishism" and media ignorance *a-la-Frankfurt-School*. Indeed, every shot is inscribed with the systemic violence that characterises capitalism (Žižek, 2009): it is enough to look at their pure form, their composition, every camera movement, the obsessive way the zoom is used to *hurl* the viewer at an especially luxurious detail: the radiance of the gold, the diamond statuette, the shining logo on the priceless sports car.

There is comfort in the act itself of looking at these images because they embody not only the exploitation, but also—and perhaps it is the same thing—the confirmation that the promises of neoliberalism can be fulfilled. These programs pacify because they show that the beautiful people do indeed exist and are so marvellously kind as to let us into their private worlds to serve as apostles of the good news of the Free Market: these hard-working men and women have these houses because they deserve it; in other words, because it can be done. The system works, of course, although we are still trying to *expose*—yet again that word appears—the keys and codes for its operation.

Conversely, the haunted house variety of the contemporary horror genre is based on an original premise that has not yet been sufficiently analysed: the house's inhabitants,

who are subject to a barrage of apparitions and the emotional and physical torture resulting therefrom, *cannot move house because they are so poor*. In some cases they wanted to be as rich as the warm and welcoming families in *¿Quién vive aquí?*, which is why they bought what they thought was a bargain: a large, rather old house offered to them for an absolute steal. In the aforementioned *Poltergeist*, for example, Eric Bowen knows that his only choice to keep his family from plunging directly into social exclusion is to stay in their new house whatever may happen. In *Sinister 2* (C. Foy, 2015), Courtney Collins has sought refuge for herself and her two children from her abusive husband on an old farm where they live on the very brink of destitution. In some cases, in an ironic twist, it is the architect himself that ends up trapped in the haunted house, after investing all his money in a mansion that supposedly can be renovated and, therefore, offers the potential for speculation. The story of the architect trapped inside the spiral of horror represented by the haunted house was proposed for the first time in an episodic film from 1945, *Dead of Night* (A. Cavalcanti, C. Crichton, B. Dearden and R. Hamer). However, its presence has grown in recent decades both in pictures made in the West—*White Noise* (G. Sax, 2005), *The House Next Door* (J. Woolnough, 2006)—and in emerging film industries—for example, the Taiwanese *Heirloom* (L. Chen, 2006) or the Thai film *The Closet* (Cho Kin Nam, 2007). Frederic Jameson referred to the haunted house genre as "the architectural genre par excellence" (1998: 45), to such an extent that we can even find studies of the genre written by professional architects, such as *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film* (Curtis, 2008).

In more recent cases, it is also important to note that it is not always an "architect" who becomes trapped in the horror, as instead the film links the trauma directly to the stock market and economic activity, as in the case of *Haunting of the Innocent* (M. Hish, 2014) or *A Cure for Wellness* (G. Verbinski, 2016).

Of course, nearly every film about haunted houses includes one or more shots in its first act intended to reflect the *anthropomorphisation* of the home. For example, when its future residents arrive, the house rises up as a menacing being, with its facade appearing like a kind of malevolent face watching them. In other cases, such as the exquisite prologue to *The Last Will and Testament of Rosalind Leigh* (Rodrigo Gudiño, 2012), we are shown a series of poeticised shots that give the impression that the house is breathing, responding to the light: that *it's alive*. The haunted house has a face—but it is

not the face—while its inhabitants are generally archetypes, semi-blurred figures. The families threatened tend to be ordinary, increasingly poor, disadvantaged people who step into the middle of a historical trauma and end up having to pick up the pieces of the insatiable spectre in question.

There are thus three categories of what Deleuze and Guattari referred to as "faciality" (2000): *the face of the house* (which is a threat not because it is the face, but because it *has* a face); the *face of the ghost* (which is barely visible, a simple source of horror reserved for the inevitable shocks like those offered in the British film *The Other Side of the Door* [J. Roberts, 2016]); and finally, the *face of the poor*, which is always the most terrifying and troubling of the three. I will explore these three faces in the following sections.

5.1 The face of the house/The face of the ghost

As Lévinas (1993) astutely noted, the basic difference between objects that seem to have a face and actual human faces is more than an ontological distinction; rather, it occurs on the other side of ontology. The horror genre makes use of this category of faciality in conjunction with the sinister precisely to deliberately invert the ethical, binding, inescapable category of the face of the Other. To put it more clearly: beings can kill easily—consider, for example, the demonic doll in *Annabelle* (J. R. Leonetti, 2014)—precisely because, although they have more or less human features, they *are not* a face.

In a certain sense, the ghost and the face have the same identity, functioning as two sides of the same coin. The house responds through the *substance*, the *materiality* of the concrete space—the furniture that turns threatening—and gives horror a specific topography—for example, the basement and the attic, spaces invoked time and again as hideouts for the ghost due to their *eccentric* nature in relation to the domestic centres. The house is not merely a shell or boundary-marker for the spectre, but serves as its physical, substantial, definitive translation. It is also important to remember that both the basement and the attic are "privileged" spaces for the dimension of the past in our everyday worlds: to these spaces we entrust the furniture we no longer use, the photo albums we no longer look at, the toys nobody plays with any more. Hence, ghosts prefer to manifest themselves precisely in this "space-of-the-past", as we find in the *Sinister*

(S. Derrickson, 2012) series of films, or in the surprising ending to *The Babadook* (J. Kent, 2014).

On the other hand, the ghost essentially falls under the category of the *affective*. Indeed, it is often nothing more than a feeling unleashed, unconstrained, a kind of crazed drive that never managed to find an object on which to project itself. A feeling, but *beyond a human feeling* precisely due to its voracity, its lack of containment. In addition to the legacy of repression described by Wood, the ghost represents a profound inner panic that desire, memory and love have no end. Death, as a limit, imposes an *end-of-story*—if only for the survivors—and in doing so it offers us who remain the impression of the very possibility of a meaning.[1]

This terror of the "beyond-the-limit" that is confined inside a house is extraordinarily expressed in *The Woman in Black* (J. Watkins, 2012), a veritable exercise in style that shows us how elements inherited from literature—plots, character motivations, "peripeteias", etc.—can be reduced to a minimum to crank up the terror to surprising levels. Ghosts pass through walls, of course, but they also pass through *times*—a feature, incidentally, essential to the order of the *affective* in which I have placed them. One of the most remarkable films of recent years, the Australian picture *Lake Mungo* (J. Anderson, 2008), is constructed as a thriller involving a grieving family (the Palmers, in clear tribute to Lynch's famous Laura) whose eldest daughter drowned in a lake. The film uses different filmic materials (documentary, family pictures, home-made videos and even mobile phone photos) to put together a horrendous tale of secrets and apparitions that connect different temporal dimensions. The same is true of *I Am a Ghost* (H. P. Mendoza, 2012), which inverts the point of view of the narration so that the ghost is in a way forced to recognize her own spectral nature and to remember her own story. The interesting aspect of this last example is that diegetic time is completely broken up, fragmented, composed of innumerable repetitions, shots with no apparent time-frame, digressions, and black spaces. The narrative arrangement *denies* the

[1] This idea is complex and I owe it essentially to José Luis Pardo's *La regla del juego* (2004), in which the philosopher focuses our understanding of the meaning of stories exclusively on their *ending*—i.e., on the gaze that enables us to frame the correct correlation of actions and emotions located within it. While Pardo suggests that it is impossible to transfer this same idea to the personal and vast—but not infinite—narrative of one's own life, I would dare to posit that the very idea of an ending, as unexpected and violent as it may be, offers us, as I suggested above, the subjective impression of the very possibility of a meaning. The horror genre, with its constant obsession with preventing humans from resting in peace, erodes this impression, and in so doing suggests a profound panic beyond the need (to keep from going insane) for perpetual peace.

chronological arrangement of life itself and turns the viewing experience into an *other-thing*, an *other-time*.

The dislocation of time, although a motif typical of the horror genre, has in the context that concerns us here a second nuance: what "returns" is not simply a family or individual trauma, but a contextual economic situation of a global nature. The figure that "returns" embodied in the anthropomorphisation of the haunted house, is the poor, the marginalised, a figure that had been elided from the stories told before the economic collapse. The familiar and the political, as we will see in the next section, end up merging.

5.2 The face of the poor

In 2016, the film *The Conjuring 2* (J. Wan) had its worldwide release. What in principle promised to be just another simple piece in that inspired universe of horror constructed in recent years by James Wan ended up being what is without doubt one of the most brilliantly *political* films about the economic crisis. Indeed, its proposition can only be read through the clarity with which it weaves the connections between horror, revenge and poverty.

The victims of the haunted house in *The Conjuring 2* are dirt poor. They are scraping by in a house that would already be terrifying in itself without needing a ghost to haunt it. In an absolute flash of brilliance, Wan presents a scene in which the family's mother decides to stop smoking to be able to buy her son the only indulgence he has: cookies for breakfast.

It is important to note that the film also engages in a dialogue with many of the notes outlined by Mark Fisher about the "ghostly" nature of our time (2018). For Fisher, the children who emerged from the Thatcher administration - to which the film itself directly refers - are those for whom the very idea of the future does not exist. Condemned to live in a process of constant technologization, but without a "redeeming" sense (neither aesthetic nor symbolic) that dominates their existences, what remains floating in the atmosphere is a kind of mechanical, rudimentary existence, where the ghost becomes almost the daily note: the past returns either as a threat -the old man who

resists death and who manifests himself from the living room sofa- or as pure melodramatic anecdote. To give two concrete examples, the opening sequence of the English plot uses a whole punk imagery - the famous *No Future* painted on the walls, the music of The Clash - to underline the meaninglessness of its inhabitants. Later, when the protagonist wants to generate a space of calm in the middle of the haunted house, he will sing with his guitar *I can't help falling in love with you* as a bad imitation of Elvis, a musician that Fisher himself links to the concrete existence of this more or less symbolic "future".

The film also plays with the very idea of *hauntology* as a way of communicating both with the dead and with the traumas of real life. The second act of the film, in essence, is intended to put into images some of the clichés of brutal neoliberalism that have brought us here: the poor girl lies, as she wilfully destroys her own furniture to "fake" a ghost attack; the authorities are right to distrust the poor, just as the police or the spiritualists themselves feel "swindled". However, the twist in the story that leads to the final act is the discovery of the voices of the dead. Thanks to the manipulation of a series of recordings, Ed (Patrick Wilson) and Lorraine (Vera Farmiga) arrive at the truth: the suffering of the helpless family has even led them to set up *a mise en scene* that mixes the real ghosts and their own desperation. The neoliberal alibi is dismantled: there is no pretence. The problem belongs to the order of language: the ghosts speak a language, the same as the poor, and their vocabulary needs to be "reconstructed", their actions "rethought", in order to arrive at the explanation—and the cure—for the social breakdown that has occurred: “It is only when the possibility of supernatural spooks has been laid to rest that we can confront the Real ghosts.... or the ghosts of the Real” (Fisher, 2018: 154).

Those of us who observe the brutality with which the economic crisis devastated whole families could not help but be amazed by James Wan’s simple and stark x-ray portrait, in just two hours of film, of the face of the poor, of their shame and their fear. The film is not merely a catalogue of exorcisms and apparitions, but a damning allegation of the pure horror of social exclusion: of the rage of the elderly who die at home in total solitude after a lifetime paying taxes, of the general scepticism that overtakes us when we hear the poor speak, of the inefficacy of good intentions and the mirage of charity. But it also speaks of love, of the risk entailed in trusting in a person who is suffering, of

the problems entailed precisely in that which can bring salvation: trusting in the poor and creating community with them.

The Conjuring 2 constituted the product of the crisis *par excellence* precisely because it brought together, in a unique twist, the *repressed* ideas that nobody else had managed to bring to light. First of all, with its explicit indictment of the neoliberal mechanisms of the Reagan/Thatcher era, it signalled some clear antecedents to the crisis and named the main parties responsible—compelling us, in the process, to acknowledge the current political heirs to that profound disdain for the less fortunate members of society. Secondly, it constructed a precise cinematic form to speak about the *horror of being poor*. What enables us to pick apart the crux of the action is, quite simply, a radical, deranged act of surrender, on the very limits of belief. In a world where the poor are criminalised for their own poverty, where it is constantly suggested that they are to blame because they are lazy, idle and living off government handouts instead of *working hard enough* to prove *productive* to the corporate world of the day, the protagonists in the film decide to believe in the fear and desperation of the asphyxiated citizen. The belief in their complete abandonment, taken in all seriousness, directs the action, and in doing so transcends categories like revolution, solidarity, and of course, compassion or charity.

It is now, at last, established as a definite ethical act: individual, unavoidable, definitive and defining. Nobody can accept the good for me, nobody can do the right thing on my behalf. After all, returning to Lévinas, this is the key problem with the good: that before I can choose it, it has already chosen me (2003). This brings us to the paradox that serves as my conclusion: the horror genre, so often dismissed as puerile, repetitive and even (in its worst moments) explicitly conservative, has been a key genre for understanding the background and current context of the global financial crisis.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to outline the importance that a textual motif—the haunted house—has had in the creation of films about the crisis. Following the line of argument in this article, I believe I have shown how a concept as rich in philosophical

applications as the *ghost* continues to be a fully operative force for embodying (if you'll pardon the contradiction) the tensions of the social context in which its stories are told.

At the beginning of the article, when I mentioned the original etymology of φάντασμα, I made reference to two terms, *light* and *presence*, as basic categories of vision. Now we can appreciate how the cinema of the crisis, in conjuring up its spectres, fulfils the two forgotten requirements of the term: its ghosts shed light (on the repressed economic injustice suffered by citizens) and bring before us, like ruins and abandoned buildings, the concrete physical evidence of the urban development disaster.

The case of Detroit is especially interesting for reflecting on the dialectic proposed here. On the one hand, certain poetic visions attempt to use the ruins to suggest the possibility of a "third space" (Jim Jarmusch) halfway between the old capitalist dream and the possibility of a more conscious habitation of the humanist implications of time, art and love. In contrast, other more bitter visions (David Robert Mitchell, Fede Álvarez) show the most brutal vision of human nature surviving amidst the ruins: poverty, isolation, grief. Between these two poles, *The Conjuring 2* invites us to rethink the relationship with poverty, with its language and with the way it has been demonised during the years of the crisis

The idea of the house as an inhabitable space is subjected to an economic logic that ranges from the dazzling—TV shows in which impeccable homes are put on display—to the concealed—through the depiction of private and often repressed social traumas. The seminal cases of *Only Lovers Left Alive* and *Lost River* constitute perfect examples of how the haunted house today can only be understood in the socioeconomic context in which it exists: large-scale evictions and, in short, a growing gap between rich and poor that is reflected in the topographic development of urban areas.

Only from this perspective can we understand that the real driving force of horror in our era is precisely the fear of being identified as citizens excluded from the productive structures imposed by the market. To a certain extent, it is a logical consequence of the discourses intended to legitimise neoliberalism: the losers are left behind only because they want to be, because they don't try hard enough, or because they haven't taken their professional development seriously. According to this view, every citizen devastated by the crisis bears the blame for his or her own fate.

In counterpoint to this, in the last section of this paper I have proposed a possible solution, also presented in the horror film: the vindication of the concept of "faciality", as postulated by Deleuze, and its interweaving with the thought of Lévinas: to re-discover (through cinema) the face of the Other, their symbolic position of exclusion, the spaces in which their abandonment is realised. This is perhaps the key to the contemporary horror film's importance and the final conclusion of this analysis: that in response to those who tend to trivialise the genre, it is worth pointing out that many of its mechanisms are, insofar as they mirror our society, profoundly ethical.

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